

**Oral History Interview with
Lavina Penley**

Cal Poly Pomona University Library

Lavina Penley Summary

Lavina Penley (1882-1981) served as the first librarian at the Cal Poly Voorhis campus in San Dimas. She recalls visiting the campus prior to 1938 when it was Voorhis School for Boys, her work at Emerson Junior High School, and how she was hired at Cal Poly. Penley discusses her experiences of the Voorhis campus and impressions of the students and staff.

Subject Headings

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Voorhis School for Boys

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Lavina Penley

July 20, 1972

*Interviewed by Kenneth Kitch
Transcribed by Iman Mirza*

KK: This is the afternoon of July 20, 1972 and we're in the home of Miss—Mrs. Lavina Penley, who for many, many years was the librarian at the Voorhis campus and who probably - from what I've heard and from what I've already gathered from her—knows more about the real people who were there than almost anybody else she could find.

This is at 623 Texas Avenue in Pomona and we're going to spend some time this afternoon just recalling some of those things about the early Voorhis days that Ms. Penley can do for us.

By the way, first of all, how do you spell your first name?

LP: L-A-V-I-N-A it's Lavina—

KK: L-A-V-I-N-A Lavina.

LP: I always thought that my grandmother would know how to spell her name, she was trying to [inaudible] because it came to name me from one of- from one of her friends, and I've never seen the name in earlier writings. It was Lavinia, daughter of Latin... you know.

KK: That's right.

LP: But I always thought maybe they just didn't know how to spell that.

KK: [Laughs].

LP: I was named from my mother, who was named for a friend, her mother. So—

KK: Well, I see. You've [inaudible] for a long time now, haven't you?

LP: Yes, 90 years.

KK: Mrs. Penley is, as she says, is 90 years and it's a real privilege to work with her—

LP: And 6 months.

KK: 90 years and 6 months, alright.

KK: Now, I'd like to have you go ahead and tell us how you first heard about Cal Poly at Voorhis, how you happen to be hired there, what you did and some of the people and events that you remember. So, if you'll just take it [recorder] and fly, and I'll sit here and listen.

LP: So, I first knew about Voorhis when it was the grade school for boys and it was a showplace, as you know, in its early days. [It's the] most beautiful campus and very inspiring ideas behind it because the story was, I don't know if this is true or not but, when Jerry [Voorhis] graduated from Yale, he was asked what he wanted for a graduation present. He said, "A million dollars to build a school for boys."

No, I don't think he'd tell you that it's true but that's the story that went around. So, everybody in Pomona who had a car, and who could drive, always took a trip up to Voorhis on Sunday afternoon(s) to look at that beautiful place and it was truly beautiful—

KK: And it still is.

LP: It's a beautiful location. I suppose it isn't so well kept up but, every blade of grass was just right in the early days.

[PAUSE]

And I recall one of my first trips that a friend took me up here [Cal Poly], we came down the hill from the campus and to our right – I can't recall the names, but those places just near that bridge, in the early days, on the right was a mama skunk and her children coming down the hill—

KK: Coming down the—[chuckles]

LP: Yes, and she put on her little brakes you know? And she said something to the children and they put on their little brakes. The brake of my friend's car was applied and we just sat there while she talked to the children, made up her mind what she's going to do. That was a very—turned out to be very interesting and pleasurable but had the brakes not worked, our car and those little people, I guess, wouldn't have been so nice.

KK: No, it wouldn't. We still have skunks around there.

LP: In my first introduction after I went out there, to work, was one day in the library when I had just passed the power place and noticed that the screen wasn't in the right place. I adjusted it. The fellas were taking a test in there and, you know, Jerry Voorhis left his dog there when he went to—was it Washington?

KK: Yes, he did, [he was a] congressman.

LP: [Chuckles] Yes.

KK: What was the name of the dog by the way?

LP: That—I have tried to think of that dog's name.

KK: I'm going to see Jerry later this week so—

LP: And I thought of the dog so often, she was so lonely. I think her name began with "G," but I get Jerry Dimitman's dog and that one, the names mixed up. Well, she felt so lonely after family that she adopted one of the boys and the [inaudible] constantly. And she'd come in the library and stay within there and look for the fella. But she had just left the library when I heard—

[BREAK]

LP: If you hear a sudden silence, do you?

KK: [Chuckles] Yes, you do.

LP: [Chuckles] Well, you know how there's a little chit chat going on usually and suddenly, it was very still. Somebody whispered to me and said, "Mrs. Penley, there's a skunk in the fireplace."

KK: [Chuckles] There's a skunk in the fireplace. Okay.

LP: Yes, and I didn't know how to get the skunk out and fortunately, these dogs had left.

LP: [Chuckles] Maybe they were being a little disturbance.

KK: [Chuckles].

LP: Well, it required the services of an old lady. People who knew how to get skunks out and they got Mrs. Skunk towed out through the vent in the fire—where the ashes—you know I can't think of what you call that.

LP: So, in all casualty occurred that time, but I can't imagine what it would've been like.

KK: Yeah.

LP: I've heard you've had to use [inaudible] of tomato juice and be buried in the dirt.

KK: I've heard that.

LP: But I haven't had any practical—

KK: You know what I would say, teacher, back in Kansas, I taught at a rural high school. And we had a bunch of bohemian families living nearby, and we call them "Bohos."

LP: Yes, I've heard that.

KK: Well, I had three or four of those children in my classes and their mothers would sew them into their underwear when cold weather began. They would keep that underwear on there until spring.

LP: [Chuckles].

KK: And those kids would go out and trap skunks.

LP: Well that—

KK: And [chuckles]—

LP: That didn't do the joy right—

KK: You always put them near the window [chuckles].

LP: [Laughs].

KK: Got to open the window. [Laughs] but at any rate—

LP: Well, any rate I first knew about the school and knew how beautiful it was and what was being done there. The first time I ever went in the building, I think we were on the sightseeing tour; I don't know now. But I recall going in the office building and passing Jerry's office where he was talking to a boy. Of course, I didn't know I'd ever be back there again.

The opening that occurred for me was because I had reached the age of 64 and was not going to be hired in Pomona as—library—I don't know what they call me but—library clerk I think because I didn't have a bachelor's degree so I couldn't be on a regular teacher's schedule.

[PAUSE]

But I had followed all of the requirements of going to school and taking courses and so forth. The time came for us to sign contracts and we see raises of a certain amount, you know?

KK: Mm-hm.

LP: Each time—but I didn't get one. I wondered about it. So after [inaudible] said I was to ask the superintendent of the schools, well it seems I would be led out when I was 65 and so I wasn't going to have this raise you see?

KK: Mm-hm.

[PAUSE]

LP: Dr. Simons knew that the Voorhis School was going to reopen the agricultural school because it had been closed because no students were left—

KK: That's right.

LP: Due to the war [World War II]—

KK: The war, yeah.

LP: And he knew that it was going to be reopen and he, being a great friend of mine, thought that I could do the job, but I didn't know anything about agriculture. In addition to not having a bachelor's degree, I feel like I knew nothing about the subject matter that was going to be taught.

But he [Dr. Simons] went to see Mr. [Harold] Wilson, and Mr. Wilson came to see me at Emerson Junior High. It seems that he observed me sufficiently and I didn't know what he was there for or who he was even, and he thought I'd be alright with these were little, little kids—junior high kids.

KK: [Chuckles] Yeah.

LP: I suppose that's because I was still alive, well, was exposed to their [inaudible] product and survived.

KK: [Laughs].

LP: Any rate, he [Mr. Wilson] made an appointment to come and see him at the Voorhis unit.

KK: Yeah.

LP: And I realized what a difficult job it was to get there because the road wasn't very good and I wasn't a mountain driver. I don't have a car that was young as it used to be, but I sat in his office looking out at the beautiful, purple haze that you could see in those days. And looking through that office—I can't describe which office that was, but it looked out over the hills.

KK: Yes.

LP: I sat there quite a while, trying to think of those hills and that beautiful coloring, made me think that I take that job, accept the job. So, I did and I was so weary from finishing up the work I was doing at Emerson that I couldn't make it the month that they wanted me to come. I think I was to come July 1st.

KK: That's the beginning of the fiscal year

LP: Yes, and I couldn't get through at Emerson; trying to clear everything at the meeting, all the records and notes for whoever my successor would be.

KK: Cleaning the house before you move.

LP: Yes. [PAUSE] And, see I'm still cleaning the house and that's what I'm trying to do, but don't wake the dead right?

KK: [Chuckles].

LP: Well, I went and I said I would, and I could. And I can assure you that I knew nothing about what I was doing.

KK: [Chuckles].

LP: It was, I remember, as most women had to start clearing out the cupboards under the windows of the library. I'm not sure the direction, but I think west.

KK: That's right, it is. Northwest.

LP: Yes, and in the first cupboard I found some jars of seeds, which didn't seem strange to me. But there was a feathered pillow; there remains a feathered pillow in there.

KK: [Chuckles].

LP: And the remains of a deceased rat. I couldn't really appreciate that. [Inaudible] things too well at the time, I don't know that I can yet. Any rate, I stayed there 'til—worked there, I worked but maybe not at what they want me to be doing but I worked anyway. Mr. [Julian] McPhee came down and I met him. He looked at me rather quizzically, I think because I had a kitchen apron on.

KK: [Laughs].

LP: And some gloves on. I was accustomed to handling books and you can't touch new books with dirty fingers. Nothing was clean enough around there that I could handle a book.

KK and LP: [Chuckles]

LP: You know, but I stayed until they found it a day for me to depart, any rate—

KK: Well, how long was that?

LP: Well, I went when I—see I had to leave at my 70th birthday and—

KK: [Hums in agreement] Yeah.

LP: It occurred—

KK: That was state regulation.

LP: Yes, and I went, I think I was 64 when I went because Dr. Simons tried to find a job where I could start working even ahead of when I had to leave Pomona. See, I had to leave at 65 and... well with that you could figure out how long it was to make that time.

It was very—the work was very inspirational in a way because there were all sorts of people there, boys there. Many of them had been in the service and they were very... I'd say many of them are very upset still.

KK: You mean from an emotional standpoint?

LP and KK: Yes.

LP: And when a plane would go over our heads, well some people you know, is trying to buzz in in case they could see down on the ground. I've seen fellas with perspiration, they get just white in the face.

KK: Oh, bad.

LP: Perspiration starts. And some never smiled a single time, in all the time they were there. I understood some of those fellas had been tail gunners and bombers and that was tough.

KK: Yes, it was. Those flying [inaudible] tail gunners—

LP: Yes, that was no happy recollection they had. And I remember they were racially different. I remember one later on, a couple of boys—one German and one French—and it turned out that they had been in the Air Forces when Hamburg was bombed.

KK: Mm-hm.

LP: And you know, there was lots of emotion involved, among the men in many aspects of their school life.

KK: Don't you think that was really natural when you look back at our Civil War and—

LP: Yes.

KK: See how long those deep enmities made themselves manifested at times?

LP: You know every once in a while, something turns up now that shows that and how deep-seated that enmity was.

KK: Uh-huh.

LP: And I was talking to, just recently, a man who came here who was from [inaudible]. And I had always accepted Japanese boys and all farm boys; they were just boys to me, men to me. They were not—I think tried to outlive the whole thing, things that my family was arguing about.

But this man said to me, when he was working in the neighborhood and I had a Japanese working in the yard just within 2 or 3 years. It was always my custom to introduce any two men that appeared on the ground, whether I—whatever they were doing here, they were people to me.

KK: That's right.

LP: And this man said to me afterwards, "It was strange to me, to be shaking hands with our enemy." I thought, "Enemy? I'd never thought of these Japanese fellas as being enemies?"

KK: Yes.

LP: But they were. I was married to an Englishman and I—my family was still fighting with the Revolutionary War.

KK: They were [chuckles].

LP: Strangely enough, although they weren't here until somebody—

KK: They figured they inherited the War didn't they?

LP: Yes, well it seems one of my cousins who lives in Florida is a nut on ancestry, which I had never been too concerned with. But he told me that our [inaudible] cousins arrived in—I may get this wrong- 1808 and the French and Indian War was in 1812 wasn't it?

KK: Yeah.

LP: But I just heard somebody—

KK: No, the War of 1812.

LP: 1812 both the English and the French were all engaged in—

KK: Yeah, they were.

LP: Well, getting back to Voorhis, I heard about it through Dr. Simons. I knew about the Voorhis school earlier, but I knew about this opening that was coming up. I enjoyed all my life there, but I wasn't accomplishing what I wanted to do, but I enjoyed being there and working with all those people.

KK: What did you want to accomplish that you were not accomplishing?

LP: I wanted to get a good, working library built.

KK: Mm-hm.

LP: But I couldn't do it.

KK: That's right.

LP: And I had to explain to people very often that it wasn't book-learn and all that they were working with, but they were trying to use their hands and to make a workable life and now I've seen and heard that they are going back to that idea—

KK: Isn't that interesting? And Stanford University and Caltech have even said this much.

LP: Yes! You know, I have evolved that idea for myself when I was a child because my family were working people; they weren't college-educated those days. But I saw that many of the people who had, I don't know what they were called in those days, but they were called nervous breakdowns. Do you happen to know?

KK: Oh, they called them "collapses" for one thing. Do you remember that?

LP: Yes, they collapsed.

KK and LP: [Chuckle].

LP: Well, I got to looking at these people even though I was a child and I thought, "Well if everybody who is a doctor or a lawyer, could do something with these hands like carpentry or a new carpet [inaudible], they wouldn't be so nervous. If the carpenters and the people who can do anything else, could study and read something, they'd be happier people." So, I guess that's what the polytechnic school was supposed to do.

KK: I guess so, yes.

LP: And at least you know that we mean to do practical things along with the theoretical.

KK: I don't know, President [Julian] McPhee always had the idea that, "You never learned anything until you can do it."

LP: Well, I agreed with that. I could never learn anything until I could say it, explain it to somebody else, to write and write it down, and do it myself. But I can't do anything now; tried to show a girl how to hand something and you know, I lost all my hand powers. Of course, arthritis doesn't do anything for your brain or hands either.

KK: [Chuckles].

LP: Well, there were lots of interesting people who went to school there and interesting teachers too.

KK: Fine, how about telling me about some that you particularly remember?

LP: The students or the teachers? [Chuckles].

KK: Both. Let's take the teachers. Who were some of the teachers that you particularly remembered and why?

LP: Well—I remember all of them, but some of them were sufficiently different than—

KK and LP: [Chuckles].

LP: Since we are discussing Nixon nowadays, Mr. Welch—

KK: Gary Welch?

LP: Harry Welch.

KK: [Laughs].

LP: And [inaudible] lived in Whittier, you know? And he used to tell us stories that involved his realities and the Nixon family and I guess they would write down some of their reminiscences nowadays. Well, Mr. Welch was a very interesting teacher and he could do things that were different from how the high school teachers that I was used to—the men teachers—that they can do. And Mr. [inaudible] of course had a wide, artistic life as well as horticultural. You might remember that he means simple being located in the library because the only place big enough to have it.

LP: Of course, Henry House was very practical, down-to-earth [inaudible].

KK: He's been an agricultural teacher.

LP: Yes.

KK: They brought him up from the valley.

LP: Yes, I know and the people who came from the valley, several of them had been associated with people I know around here. I had neighbors that came from the valley and their lifestyle was quite different from the lifestyle of some of the other people.

KK: You find a lot of hard-shelled Baptists down there by the way.

LP: Well, I've never been associated with any of them at all. I've gone to a Baptist church but they're a long ways [inaudible].

KK and LP: [Chuckles].

LP: My uncle's references were—I guess because some of them couldn't drink quite a bit, but they probably do, I don't know. About that, how old we're drinking doesn't suit the style of life we live nowadays; maybe one could drink because [inaudible] could take you home but I don't see any cars that'll get you in the right place.

KK and LP: [Chuckles].

KK: Someday, we may have one.

LP: Maybe.

KK: Now let's stray here just a little bit. How do you regard today's young people as compared with the young people with who you worked with then? I'm not seeking for anything; I'd just like to have your evaluation and comment.

LP: Well, I think they are much more knowledgeable about some things and they're more sincere, I think, than many people whom I grew up with because we were told what to chuck and [inaudible]. But I think young people have too many distractions to learn to do some things well and they don't all like the same things that children in my generation did. I admire young people and I've always been interested [inaudible].

KK: The generation gap is one-sided isn't it?

LP: Yes.

End of interview

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